Dec. 28, 2010.

We don't know the shape of the future massing up before us here in America and the democratic West. We don't pay it much heed. But the power required to guarantee our supposed right to pursue whatever we want…that power is very great. The more we demand from it to satisfy our desires, the more power over ourselves we place in its ready hands. The power to satisfy is the power to manage, direct, supply and control, which is to say, it is the power to mismanage, pervert, deprive and enslave.

Unlimited individual rights means unlimited state power. There is no two ways about it.

What that power will look like here (or in the vast multi-national realm sprung up all around us) we don't yet know. We've seen first outlines drawn by Tocqueville, and more importantly we have seen its actual forerunners and their work: the death camps, the bloodlands, the killing fields or Europe and Asia…and our own medical institutions right here at home, willing collaborators in the butchery of those waiting to be born, in their millions, without limit, year after year...

The gospel for the feast of the Holy Innocents tells the story of Herod and the magi. Herod was king in Judea, and the magi we call the three "kings." In the story we see the responses of these kings, Herod and the magi, to the new king, the one born in Bethlehem…

We're familiar with the story; the magi are on our Christmas cards, after all, and we aren't generally inclined to think much about what seems familiar. But what emerges from this story is nothing less than the pattern of the rest of salvation history until the apocalyptical culmination of all things.

The three kings come to worship. They bow down and offer gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—meant to acknowledge the royalty, the divinity and the sacrificial mortality of the infant before them. They represent those political powers of the earth which would come to accommodate themselves in some way to the new and greater authority they beheld in Christ and in the image of God Himself revealed in Man. Political rule, over men now revealed to the

nations as the living image of God in the world, had to acknowledge new and serious limits on itself. The dignity of man is revealed to be so great that legitimate governors of men must kneel before it. The true measure of human rights it taken precisely here.

By contrast, the political authority of Rome, like that of Egypt and Babylon and the other ancient empires, had gotten into the habit of claiming absolute power and a kind of divine sovereignty. The emperors were to be worshipped and the rest of men were effectively reduced to slaves. Nothing was to rule over the emperor. Herod, who was King of Judea at the time of our story, himself had temples built for the worship of the emperor, whose puppet he had made himself to be. The Jews hated him because of this—they would under no circumstances bow before an image of the emperor! The Jews hated him for this and because of his monstrous and murderous ambition. He slaughtered, among many others, his own wives and sons…

So if in our story the magi represent those political leaders and governments that limit their claims and bow to the Image of God in Man, Herod represents those powers that claim unbounded authority and demand that the rest of men bow in worship before them.

For Herod, the appearance of the Christ was a direct challenge to his divine claims. He would not accommodate himself and therefore was bound, by his own self-understanding, to do whatever he deemed necessary to extinguish the life of his competitor. The greatest antagonist to those who think of themselves as gods is those men and women who understand themselves as the living *image* of God in the world and who will not submit themselves to such men as Herod. Herod slaughters anyone who resists him, even any child who might grow into such dignity as to resist him. He thus unveils the demonic inhumanity of his rule.

The slaughter of the innocents unveils the demonic inhumanity of all claims to absolute rule, absolute sovereignty or unbounded rights. That unveiling, what we call in Latin “re-velatio,” is what we call in Greek “apo-calypsis.” The appearance of God in Man unveils the human condition in its greatest dignity and in the fullest depths of its malevolence.

The appearance of Christ ignited apocalyptic fire in the world of pagan antiquity. The early church identified with the holy innocents because Rome became for them “the Beast” that went out to slaughter them, too. With the Jews, the early Christians provoked the bloody hatred and distain of those who claimed the right to rule absolutely.

With time, however, something most extraordinary occurred: the Roman “Beast” weakened, and a reconfigured Rome took its place, and emperors banned their own worship, forbade the persecution of Christians and accepted to submit themselves to the authority of Christ embodied in the living image of God in the world, the Body of Christ, the Church. For certain, that submission was only partial and imperfect, always somewhat ambiguous, but it was nevertheless decisive. This great accommodation founded Christendom, the worldly realm that marked a space where the People of God could live with some peace and a reasonable degree of security. Thus the slackening of the earlier apocalyptical tension.

But when across the face of what was Christendom there come to be the death camps, the trenches, the bloodlands and that slaughter of innocents which we like dumb sheep passively endure, it becomes clear that the old accommodation expires.

We are democratic, we have no emperor. But if our democracy has come to mean the unbounded sovereignty of the people, then we are Herod, we are the Beast.

By Fr. Barry Bercier